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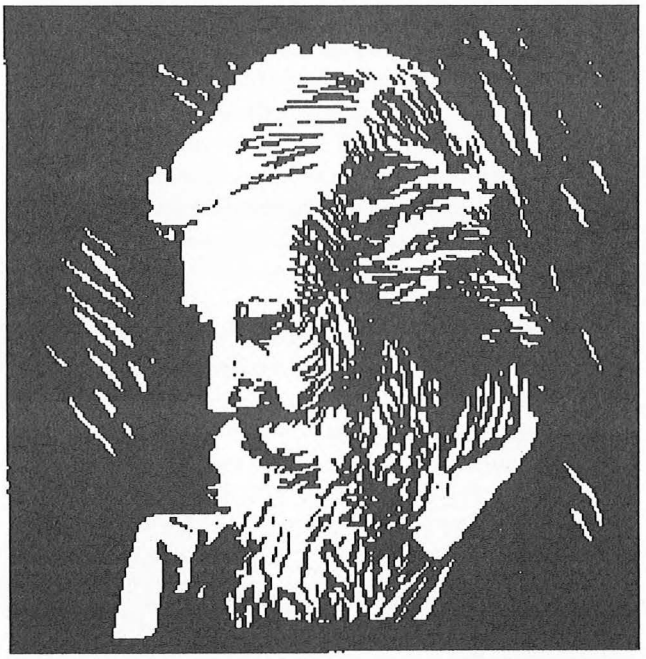
JOHN MUIR IN THE AMAZON BASIN

by Laurel Bemis

(Editor's note: a Stockton resident and recent graduate of the University of the Pacific, the author prepared this paper in a course offered by UOP's history department, "John Muir and the American Environment." Excerpts from the John Muir Papers at UOP are used by permission of the Muir-Hanna Trust.)



John Muir left New York on April 20, 1911 on a voyage that would fulfill his lifetime dream to travel to South America. One of his main reasons for visiting the Amazon basin at this late stage in his life was his desire to see ancient araucaria trees in their original habitat. Nicknamed the "monkey puzzle" tree, its spiny bark prevents monkeys from climbing it. Muir felt that it was one of the most important trees in existence because it has survived many geological periods. He was prepared to travel any distance, by boat and by foot if necessary, to view this biological wonder. Although he was seventy-four years old at the time of his trip, it was alleged that he could still walk twenty-five or thirty miles a day. [1]

On August 27, he wrote in his journal at noon that he was less than two hundred miles from the mouth of the Amazon. It took about an hour of cautious maneuvering by the ship's crew before dropping anchor because of the shifting delta currents which made charts unreliable. The following day, Muir viewed the land surrounding the Amazon for the first time and noted "Many magnificent dome-headed giant trees looming in most imposing grandeur above the crowded multitudes of palms." [2] That afternoon he arrived at Para and later visited the city park. He wrote in great detail about the various ferns, palms, and lilies of the garden, citing their scientific names as well as intricate measurements of their leaves, height, and other specifications.

On September 1, Muir rose at four o'clock in the morning to begin a boat trip up the great river. In some places the over-leaning trees were so close he could almost touch them. As he traveled he noticed a large number of white-flowered trees, about seventy-five feet in height, and many other trees of the same type with red flowers. Palms grew scarce after about 200 miles above Para. His journal describes the palm-thatched houses of the Indians that could be seen every few miles. Rubber was collected at these small settlements to trade for Portuguese tobacco, coffee, coal oil, calico, and other products.

During the night, he reported that a swarm of Brazilian mosquitoes came aboard and "invaded the dining room, where we were seated at the tables, causing lively slapping and clapping, in defending ourselves from their stings. The clapping was so continuous that a stranger might fancy that a speaker was being cheered. The dead mosquitoes were piled on the table-cloth at the side of each plate and each [person] seemed to be anxious to make [such] good use of the sport that he seemed to enjoy it, each claiming a greater number of the game than their neighbors." [3]

A day later, free of mosquitoes, the travelers passed through a more colorful crowd. "A good many butterflies, moths, dragonflies...are enlivening the air," Muir wrote. He also described the houses which belonged to Portuguese tradesmen, which were large with red-tiled roofs, and had big herds of cattle on the surrounding

(continued on page 6)

SIGNIFICANT BOOKS ON THE ENVIRONMENT SELECTED

Which books do environmentalists consider to have been the most significant so far published? Robert Meridith of the Pennsylvania Groundwater Policy Education Project at Pennsylvania State University has conducted a survey to determine which writings have been the most influential in shaping the environmental movement. A sample of over two hundred environmental authors, scientists, activists and government officials selected *Sand Country Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, published in 1949, as the book that had been most important in leading to the emergence of the environmental movement. The other books which made the list, in order of their selection, were Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962); *Status of the World* (an annual publication of the Worldwatch Institute); Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968); Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854); Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967); E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973); Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971); and *Limits to Growth* (1972) by Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William Behrens.

The *John Muir Newsletter* invites its readers and subscribers to make up their own list. Which books have most interested you and affected your views on the environment? Please fill out the tearsheet below and send it in to us. Responses will be correlated and announced in the next issue of the *Newsletter*.

MY ENVIRONMENTAL READING LIST

My top choices:

The book which first led me to become environmentally aware was _____ which I read in about the year _____.

It led me to become active in local environmental causes: yes ___ no ____. It led me to support environmental issues financially: Yes ____; no _____.

Comments:

(Cut out and mail to the **John Muir Newsletter** % History Dept., University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA 95211.

NEWS AND NOTES

Gordon Strain of Martinez, who sold some of his land for inclusion in the John Muir Nature Trial, died during a dedication ceremony of the land in June. He suffered a heart attack and was taken from the dedication site by helicopter to the John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek, where he died. In 1991 Strain had sold 186 acres of Mount Wanda, named after Muir's older daughter, to the National Park Service. That area offers a spectacular view of Martinez, Mount Diablo, and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and is covered by native oak, bay and fruit and nut trees. The *John Muir Newsletter* is indebted to Mr. Strain, and its staff are saddened by the loss. He was determined that his land become part of the John Muir heritage for Californians and others to enjoy.

One of our readers has sent a note of encouragement which we wish to share. **Elizabeth Pomeroy** of Pasadena writes that " . . . the *Newsletter* is excellent and I encourage you to continue! It brings far flung J.M. scholars together and benefits all our work." Please send in your thoughts--kudos or criticisms--and we will be pleased to publish them.

UPDATE ON MUIR BOOK

Although delayed, the book *John Muir: Life and Work*, edited by Sally Miller and containing papers from the 1990 Muir Conference, is still on track and will be published sometime this fall, according to the publisher, University of New Mexico Press.

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Editor — Sally M. Miller
Center Director — R.H. Limbaugh

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A NEW LOOK AT AN IMPORTANT BOOK

Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

Reviewed by Char Miller,
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

(Editor's Note: Virtually every student of John Muir's life turns to **Son of the Wilderness** *by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, whatever other biographies of Muir they may read. So it seemed a good idea to have one of today's major environmental historians take another look at the Wolfe biography almost fifty years after its publication.)*

Linnie Marsh Wolfe loved John Muir, loved his "flashing blue eyes," his lyrical language, and the wilderness ideals he represented; she also adored the Sierra, that `Range of Light' he did so much to illuminate through thought, word, and deed. Even when she dedicated *Son of the Wilderness* to her husband, Robert Wolfe, and the shared joy they felt while tramping through "the meadows and groves and along the trails of the Yosemite," she had her mind on that majestic valley's most famed interpreter: in all sorts of ways Muir had made their experiences possible.

Wolfe was nothing if not grateful, as her text amply demonstrates. By immersing herself in Muir's life, for example, by soaking in his correspondence and journals, she was able to craft what amounts to a first-person narrative, the autobiography he never wrote for himself. The book, she believed, would have the added effect of lifting "a few veils that have obscured his rich life among men, thus . . . making him somewhat more than a disembodied voice crying in the wilderness" (vii). For these efforts, Wolfe was awarded the 1946 Pulitzer Prize for biography.

The choice, in retrospect, seems odd, for the book's reception was mixed. Although the *Kirkus* reviewer found it an "inspiring story,"[1] and Richard Hofstadter praised it as the "definitive study of Muir's odd career,"[2] many other prominent journals and critics were less impressed. *The New Yorker*, among others, was disappointed: "Very earnest, very well documented, and considering the material the author had to work with, rather unforgivably dull."[3] More significant still were the concerns about the work's literary propriety and provenance. As Leonard Dubkin observed, "Mrs. Wolfe has let her love for the memory of John Muir overshadow her critical judgement, and the result is none too happy" or could in fact be called an unhappy result, flowing as well from the text's status as an "authorized" life: "one should never write a biography with the subject's daughters looking over one's shoulder."[4] Linnie Marsh Wolfe was a kept woman.

Nearly a half century later, these and other flaws seem all the more pronounced. Wolfe's documentation, for instance, is haphazard--some direct quotations are cited by sources, many others are not. Was she just sloppy in this respect? Does this signal a protectiveness of her work and her subject? In either event, subsequent historians can neither easily follow nor readily dispute her take on Muir. Then there are the "conversations" she reconstructs throughout the text, as if she had taken dictation while Muir mused upon a mountain top or got down and dirty with his avowed enemies. One stunning example emerges in her depiction of a verbal confrontation between Muir and Gifford Pinchot that allegedly occurred in the lobby of Seattle's Rainier Grand Hotel in 1897, and that she argues not only shattered their friendship but splintered the conservation movement (pp. 175-76). There is one major problem: this epochal moment cannot be confirmed either in Pinchot's or Muir's voluminous archives. In this case, as in others, Wolfe may have been merely repeating dialogue as Muir's aged colleagues (or his children) had remembered it decades later, a careless form of historical research that is compounded when she treated these fragments of memory as if they were as precise and valid as the primary documents she held in her hands. Skepticism was not her forte.

But then Wolfe was dealing with a man who was fast becoming an icon, and whose iconization only intensified following the publication of her generous biography; hoping to humanize Muir, she ended up deifying him. And that may explain this anomaly: despite a number of recent, first-rate studies on Muir, such as Michael Cohen's *The Pathless Way* and Stephen Fox's *John Muir and his Legacy*, there has been no full-fledged scholarly biography of him. Wolfe's *Son of the Wilderness* still casts a deep shadow.

[1] *Library Journal*, July, 1945, 635.
[2] *New York Times*, July 29, 1945, 7.
[3] *New Yorker*, July 28, 1945, 70.
[4] *Book Week*, July 22, 1945, 8.

ANOTHER LOOK AT A RECENT YOSEMITE HISTORY

Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness. By Alfred Runte. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. xii, 271 pp.

Reviewed by Roderick Frazier Nash, University of California, Santa Barbara.

(Editor's note: The following review is reprinted with the kind permission of the California Historical Society. It appeared in the Summer, 1991 issue of ***California History,*** *pp, 218-19.)*

The problem with the way Americans refer to their national nature preserves is that the word "park" conjures up expectations that wild places cannot and should not fulfill. Think about it. We have amusement parks, ballparks, garden parks, manicured city parks--all heavily influenced by technological civilization. People traditionally went to parks to see pretty things. Raw wilderness was the last thing expected; nature was supposed to blossom and smile on the human pursuit of pleasure.

But then Americans invented "national parks," either in 1864 as Alfred Runte suggests in this book or, as others have contended, in 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone. These were *wild* parks with all the contradictions implied by that association of words. What Alfred Runte does in this important book is expose and explore these contradictions. His focus is on Yosemite, the flagship national park, established as a state reserve in 1864 and subsequently enlarged in 1890. His subject is the changing and conflicting visions Americans have entertained about this shrine in the California Sierra. We learn of the basic tension between the view that parks are for nature (and its components--like bears, squirrels, even insect "pests") versus the parks-are-for-people perspective. The first view of parks supports the preservation of wilderness complete with predatory animals, waterfalls that do not "perform" all year, discomfort, danger, even death. The alternate vision is that national parks should cater to their clients, provide amusements and, in the process, make a tidy profit for the private concessionaires fortunate enough to gain a government-granted monopoly to operate in the park.

A talented historian and sometime national park seasonal interpreter, Dr. Runte is well qualified to analyze the Yosemite experience. But this book is not a history of Yosemite; it is an account of the conflicting ideas people have had about the management and objective of Yosemite. More precisely, this is an argument against over-commercializing, over-humanizing, and over-crowding that makes use of history. Runte has his heroes (Frederick Olsted, Joseph Grinnel, Newton Drury, and David Brower) and his villains (William Hall, David Curry, Ed Hardy and, surprisingly to some, Ansel Adams).

A generation ago it would have been argued that Runte's book was not "objective," but today historians are more frequently looked to for guidance on policy issues. They are praised for descending from the ivory tower, rolling up their sleeves and becoming "relevant" to questions of social importance. Although it has cost him friends among the powerful in Yosemite Valley, Dr. Runte is not afraid to call them as he see them. His careful research and documentation leave little room for objectors--unless they chance to be on the side of civilization as opposed to nature.

NEWS FROM THE HOLT ATHERTON LIBRARY

Library staff reports an increased use of the Muir Papers' microform edition through interlibrary loan. Scholars may request through their own library up to three reels at a time. The *Guide* is also available through ILL.

Wisconsin author Millie Stanley, who participated in the 1985 Muir Conference, is getting ready to publish her book, tentatively titled "The Heart of John Muir's World: His Personal Perspective." The text contains a number of quotes from the Muir papers.

Alexander Drummond, a Colorado writer, is completing a biography of Enos Mills, scheduled for publication by University of Nebraska Press sometime within the next year. The working title is "Enos Mills, Citizen of Nature: a Rocky Mountain Life." Enos corresponded with Muir, and some of Muir's comments are used in Drummond's text.

Recently a trio of Japanese visitors, H. Mochizuki and Noriyoshi Kato from Tokyo, and T. Hayashi from Los Angeles, explored the Muir papers in the Holt Atherton Library. They are working on a projected article for the fall edition of a magazine published by Nissan Airlines. Of particular interest were Muir's World Tour journals of 1903-1904, in which are recorded Muir's impressions of his visit to Japan.

JOHN MUIR 1985 CONFERENCE TAPES STILL AVAILABLE

During the 1985 John Muir Conference at the University of the Pacific, eight double-sided audio cassette tapes recorded fifteen presentations on all aspects of Muir's life and legacy. Those tapes are still available for $5.00 each, plus 50 cents per tape for shipping and handling. To order, indicate which of the following tapes you wish to purchase and send your list with a check for the full amount to the John Muir Center for Regional Studies, History Dept., UOP, Stockton, 95211. California residents add 7.75% sales tax.

Tape 1: Side A: William & Maymie Kimes: "Scotland Remembers John Muir" and Millie Stanley: "John Muir in Wisconsin." Side B: Peter E. Palmquist: "Wilderness Has Many Voices."

Tape 2: Side A: Bart O'Brien: "The Muir-Whitney Controversy." Side B: Paul Sheats: "Muir's Gospel of Glaciers."

Tape 3: Side A: Richard F. Fleck: "Muir's Homage to Thoreau." Side B: Ron Limbaugh: "The Nature of Muir's Religion."

Tape 4: Side A: Kathleen Wadden: "John Muir and the Community of Nature." Side B: Lisa Mighetto: "John Muir and the Rights of Animals."

Tape 5: Side A: Edmund A. Schofield: "Muir and the New England Connection." Side B: Richard J. Orsi: "Muir and the Southern Pacific Railroad."

Tape 6: Side A: Frank E. Buske: "John Muir's Alaska Exerience." Side B: P.J. Ryan: "Muir in the South Pacific."

Tape 7: Side A: Michael Cohen: "Between the Generations: John Muir and the Sierra Club as Cult." Side B: Frederick Turner: "Toward Future Muir Biographies: Problems and Prospects."

Tape 8: Side A: Linda Moon Stumpff: "All in a Quote."

All proceeds from these tapes will go to support the programs of the John Muir Center for Regional Studies.

MUIR CHI90 VIDEOS AT BARGAIN PRICES

Three volumes of video programs from the special John Muir Conference, held at UOP in 1990, are still available and at bargain prices. These tapes reflect the latest scholarly thinking on Muir and should be in every school library as well as in every personal collection of Muiriana.

Each volume is recorded on standard VHS tape. To order, specify number and amount of tapes desired, and mail your request to the John Muir Center. Each volume is now only $19.95, including tax, postage and handling, or $55 for all three volumes. Allow three weeks for delivery.

VOLUME ONE

"John Muir in the Southern Sierra," by Paul D. Sheats (lecture/slide show)

"When John Muir saw the Light: from Indianapolis toward 'The Range of Light' and Beyond," by Edmund A. Schofield (lecture/slide show)

"John Muir in Southern California," by Elizabeth W. Pomeroy (lecture/slide show)

VOLUME TWO

"John Muir's Transcendental Imagery," by Richard Fleck (lecture)

"John Muir and the Wilderness Ideal," by Don Weiss (lecture/slide show)

"Affectionately Yours, John Muir: the Correspondence between Muir and his Parents, Brothers, and Sisters," by Keith Kennedy (lecture)

VOLUME THREE

"Seventeen Years to Success: John Muir, William Gladstone Steel, and the Creation of Yosemite and Crater Lake National Parks," by Stephen R. Mark (interview with slides)

"Why Wilderness? John Muir's Deep Ecology," by James D. Heffernan (interview)

"Our National Forests in Muir's Time and Our Own," by Frederick Turner (interview)

"Botanical Explorations of California, 1860-1900," by Nancy M. Slack (interview with slides)

"J. D. Whitney and His Fault Origin of Yosemite Valley," by Neil Fahy (lecture/slide show).

(*Muir in the Amazon* **continued from page 1)**
property. By now the red-flowered tree had thinned out, and white wasp nests were frequently seen hanging from the branches of trees.

On the fourth of September the party reached Itacoatiara near the mouth of the Madeira River. Muir said that the type of malaria in this region was so lethal that some deaths occurred after only three days after infection. The malady was one of the difficulties impeding the completion of the railroad, which needed only fifty more miles. Near the site Muir met an old American ex-confederate,Mr. Stone, who had come to Brazil after the Civil War because slavery was still permitted in Brazil. He raised not only cattle, but a large amount of cacao, and had made his fortune in Brazil.

The next day the steamboat arrived at Manao, which had a population of about 100,00 inhabitants at the time and was situated near the mouth of the Rio Negro. Muir noted the darkness, almost blackness, of the Rio Negro while, in contrast, the water of the Amazon was "tawny-colored." [4] He compared the color of the Rio Negro to the streams and lakes in Scotland and the low coast areas in the southern states of the United States. When the two rivers merged, the Amazon overpowered the other, but despite the turbulence the Indian crew of their steamer was "extremely strong and able to work with a will."

The jungle's fate in the hands of developers did not seem to worry Muir. He wrote that despite "jarring fevers, dampness of every sort, debilitating heat, etc., thousands of men, young and old, rush for fortunes half crazy, half merry, into this rubbery wilderness." [5] Taking necessary precautions to ward off the mosquitoes, and exercising moderation in eating and drinking, he said, a person could get rich and then leave for a more suitable climate. His optimistic view perhaps was stimulated by the abundance that surrounded him. Besides the verdant vegetables, he noticed large flocks of white egrets, parrots, ducks, and buzzards during his journey. [6]

On September 12, after several days hard travel by skiff and on foot through the jungle and because of trouble making travel connections, Muir decided that he would return to Para instead of continuing to Iquitos. On September 15, he reached Para and for the next few days, rested by writing letters, reading those forwarded to him, and leisurely touring the gardens. On September 26, Muir left Para on the ship São Paulo and paid his last respects to the Amazon.

In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1912, after returning to the United States, Muir reflected on the future development of the Amazon region: "...the time will come when this whole region will be transformed into one of the richest garden spots on earth, the seat of a civilization greater and more far-reaching than that found to-day in the Mississippi Valley.... It is simply there potentially. You have a river system on a gigantic scale, greater than anything of the kind elsewhere...And this great body of water....flows through a country whose warm climate disposes it to the highest fertility."[7]

However, he said, most of the people were sickly and made their living from rubber rather than agricultural means. A major transformation was required to get beyond mere subsistance agriculture: "It means hard work to do more than that on the Amazon, and the people there are not of the working kind." [8] Reflecting the dominant theme of western culture, Muir believed that change would not come to the Amazon region until foreigners began development there in the next two to three centuries. In order for this change to take place, he said that three things were needed: "Drain the swamps, dike the river so that its ebb and flow will be under complete control, and kill the mosquitoes.... To carry out this programme on the Amazon would need, of course, a stupendous amount of enterprise. Just to clear away a sufficient number of trees for the work will be enough to keep the future settler busy." [9]

After traveling a thousand miles by steamboat up the Amazon River, Muir was finally able to view the araucaria in its natural state. But his enthusiasm for this single species stands in contrast to his limited view of the Amazon as an ecosystem. In 1912, Muir would have no conception of the forthcoming rapid industrialization and deforestation around the globe, which would lead to the theory of the "greenhouse effect." In addition, the leaching of Amazonian soils from overproduction and poor maintenance of the earth was not studied at the time because large-scale agriculture "slash and burn" methods had not reached the proportion that they have today. Muir also found the scenery "somewhat monotonous" because "there are no mountains, except toward the western edge of the continent, where the Andes loom up. But, in the eastern part, you steam along for hundreds of miles between two solid walls of tropical verdure, rising to a height of a hundred feet or more. Very impressive--but, as a scenic feature, lacking in diversity." [10] Therefore, although Muir enjoyed and was fully impressed by his trip to South America, for him it does not compare to the grandeur of the Sierra. At heart, John Muir was always a mountain climber.

John Muir, like his predecessors Henry Walter Bates, Alfred Russell Wallace and Alexander von Humboldt, explored the Amazon without commentary on its ecological significance. During the time they explored the region, the native flora and fauna were still abundant. None could foresee the drastic changes which would take place on a global scale during the next several decades. Muir, himself, was far more concerned with saving Hetch Hetchy than the wilderness preservation of a jungle thousands of miles away. Indeed, Muir recognized the

1993 MUIR GLORIOUS WRITING CONTEST COMING SOON

Last year's contest was such a success, we've decided to try it again. Are you a **Young Sequoia** (Age 17 or under) or an **Old Yosemite** (age 18 or older)? Whatever category, have fun trying to write a page of descriptive prose as if John Muir himself were writing. The top three entries in each category may be published in the *John Muir Newsletter*, and each winner will receive a certificate of merit and a one-year subscription to the Newsletter. Watch for contest rules and instructions for receiving an entry blank in the fall issue. All entries for this year must be postmarked by December 31.

beauty of the Amazon, as his journals reveal. However, he also envisioned a potential for growth. His proposal about diking the Amazon River was not meant as a catalyst for total destruction and industrialization of the area. Instead he favored the limited development of what he considered to be a great resource. Perhaps the first, true ecologists of Brazil were the native scientists and reformers of the region. Over the years they, more than anyone else, could see the gradual destruction of their land as a result of weak government regulations, foreign exploitation, personal greed or ignorance.

Notes

1. Anonymous, "John Muir returns. Botanist Hunted the "Monkey Puzzle" Tree in Brazil," *The [New York] Morning Sun*, March 27, 1912.
2. John Muir Papers, microfilm, University of the Pacific, Reel 30, frame 04636, page 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p.10.
4. *Ibid.*, p.25.
5. *Ibid.*, p.26.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.24-28.
7. Anonymous, "A Future Paradise for Mankind in South America," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1912, sec. 5, p. 12, cs. 1-8.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*

YOSEMITE TO APPEAR ON CALIFORNIA LICENSE PLATES

California drivers will soon be able to contribute to the state's environment by acquiring Yosemite license plates. The new plates will feature a four-color design of Yosemite Valley. Proceeds from the sale of the plates will go to the California Environmental Fund and the non-profit Yosemite Fund for preservation and restoration projects at Yosemite National Park. Costs of the plate will be $50 over the standard registration fee, and the annual renewal fee will be $40. As a charitable donation, these monies will be tax deductible. The plates will start to be available after 5000 orders have been placed. The non-profit Yosemite Fund has sponsored dozens of Yosemite projects, including habitat restoration, protection of endangered species, maintenance of trails, and creation of visitor center exhibits. Contact the Fund at 415-434-1782 for plate application forms or your local office of the California State Automobile Association.

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Please join us by completing the following form and returning it, along with a $15. check made payable to The John Muir Center for Regional Studies, University of the Pacific, 3601 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95211.

Yes, I want to join the John Muir Center and continue to receive the *John Muir Newsletter*.. Enclosed is $15 for a one-year membership . Use this form to renew your current membership. Outside U.S.A. add $4.00 for postage.

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